



BEYOND TWO-SPEED

Bimodal IT — The Wrong Answer to the Right Question

A Practitioner's Perspective on Two-Speed IT in Enterprise Transformation

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“Speed is not a department.”

The Promise That Seduced the Boardroom

Bimodal IT arrived with the force of a management consulting revelation. The idea was elegant in its simplicity: divide your technology organisation into two modes — one optimised for stability and predictability, the other for speed and experimentation. Mode 1 would keep the lights on. Mode 2 would drive innovation. The boardroom heard what it wanted to hear: you can have both, without choosing.

In my experience, this framing diagnosed the right problem — the structural tension between operational reliability and the need for rapid adaptation — and then offered precisely the wrong solution. What I have observed across multiple organisations attempting bimodal approaches over the past two years is not a story of careful balance, but of institutional dysfunction dressed up as strategic intent.

The Right Question

The underlying question bimodal IT attempts to answer is legitimate and urgent. Large enterprises are caught between two demands that feel irreconcilable. Their existing technology estates — built over decades, deeply embedded in business processes, subject to regulatory scrutiny — require careful stewardship. Meanwhile, competitive pressure, customer expectation, and the accelerating pace of technology change demand a capacity for experimentation and rapid delivery that traditional operating models were never designed to support.

This tension is real. It is structural. And it is not going away. Any organisation that pretends it can resolve the tension simply by moving faster is being naive. Any organisation that pretends it can ignore the demand for speed is being complacent. The question of how to hold both demands simultaneously is perhaps the defining challenge of enterprise technology leadership in this decade.

Why the Answer Fails

The bimodal response to this legitimate question fails for reasons that become obvious only in practice — which is why the concept survived scrutiny in the strategy document but crumbles on contact with organisational reality.

It creates a caste system. The moment you label one group as the innovative, agile team and another as the stable, traditional team, you have created a hierarchy of prestige. The pattern I have observed is consistent: Mode 2 attracts the ambitious talent, the executive attention, and the discretionary budget. Mode 1 becomes the place where careers go to stagnate. The best engineers migrate toward Mode 2 or leave the organisation entirely, hollowing out the very capability that keeps critical systems running.

It institutionalises technical debt. By explicitly separating the teams responsible for legacy systems from those building new capabilities, bimodal IT removes the pressure — and the mechanism — for modernising the core. Mode 1 becomes a containment strategy rather than an evolution strategy. The legacy estate does not gradually improve; it calcifies, becoming harder and more expensive to change with each passing quarter.

It ignores the integration problem. No enterprise system exists in isolation. Mode 2's experimental applications must eventually connect to Mode 1's systems of record — the customer databases, the transaction engines, the regulatory reporting platforms. This integration boundary becomes the most contested, most fragile, and most poorly governed territory in the entire technology estate. In my experience, it is precisely at this boundary that bimodal approaches generate their most damaging failures.

It misreads the nature of agility. The bimodal concept treats agility as a property of a team or a mode, rather than as an organisational capability. But the organisations that genuinely move fast — the ones that can respond to market shifts or deploy new capabilities in weeks rather than months — are not running two separate operating models. They have invested in making their entire delivery capability more responsive: better automation, clearer architecture, stronger engineering discipline, more empowered teams. Speed is not a department.

What Practitioners Actually See

The pattern that recurs across complex transformation programmes is depressingly consistent. An executive team, attracted by the clarity of the bimodal promise, restructures the technology organisation into two modes. For six to twelve months, Mode 2 delivers a handful of visible wins — a customer-facing application, a data analytics dashboard, a prototype that impresses the board. These early victories are cited as proof that the model works.

Then reality intervenes. The Mode 2 applications need data from Mode 1 systems. They need to comply with the same regulatory frameworks. They need to handle the same transaction volumes. The integration challenges multiply. The Mode 1 team, already demoralised and under-resourced, struggles to support the growing demands. Delivery slows. Finger-pointing begins.

Within eighteen months, the organisation has not two coherent modes but a confused middle ground: legacy systems that nobody wants to own, experimental applications that cannot scale, and an integration layer held together by manual processes and goodwill.

The Deeper Problem

What bimodal IT reveals, inadvertently, is a failure of leadership rather than a failure of operating model. The executives who reach for the bimodal framework are typically those who have not yet confronted a harder truth: that sustainable technology transformation requires investment in the core, not just in the periphery. It requires the patience to modernise legacy platforms, the discipline to enforce architectural standards, and the courage to retire systems that no longer serve the organisation's needs.

These are difficult, expensive, politically fraught undertakings. They do not lend themselves to compelling boardroom presentations. They do not produce quick wins. But they are the work that actually matters — and bimodal IT, for all its surface appeal, is a way of avoiding that work while appearing to act.

What Would Actually Help

The organisations I have seen navigate this tension most effectively have done so not by splitting their technology function in two, but by investing in a set of foundational capabilities that make the entire organisation more adaptive.

The organisations that sustain transformation are those that invest in making their entire technology estate more responsive, rather than ring-fencing innovation in a protected enclave.

This means investing in architecture that supports change — not a single monolithic platform, but a set of well-defined services with clear interfaces. It means building engineering discipline that enables safe, frequent releases across the entire estate. It means creating governance that distinguishes between the decisions that genuinely need central control and those that can be safely delegated to delivery teams.

None of this is glamorous. None of it fits on a single strategy slide. But it works — and it works precisely because it addresses the underlying structural tension rather than institutionalising it.

The Question That Remains

Bimodal IT will, I suspect, be remembered as one of those concepts that was more useful for what it revealed than for what it recommended. It surfaced a real and important tension in enterprise technology. It gave executives a language for something they were already experiencing. And then it offered them a solution that made the problem worse.

The right question — how to hold stability and speed in productive tension — remains as urgent as ever. The answer, I believe, lies not in separation but in integration: in building organisations that are simultaneously disciplined and adaptive, rather than organisations that have outsourced their adaptiveness to a team in the corner.

That is harder work. But it is the only work that actually leads somewhere worth going.